

THE STATE



OF WYOMING

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November 12, 1998

Magalie Roman Salas
Office of the Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
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445 Twelfth Street, S.W.
Washington, D. C. 20554

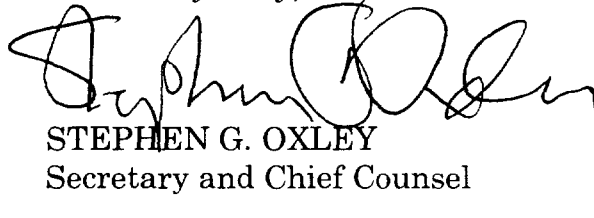
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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

Re: In the Matter of Truth-In-Billing and Billing Format
CC Docket No. 98-170

Dear Secretary Salas:

Enclosed herewith are the original and four copies of the Initial Comments of the Wyoming Public Service Commission, dated November 12, 1998, in the above-referenced matter.

Yours very truly,


STEPHEN G. OXLEY
Secretary and Chief Counsel

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FEDERAL COMM. COMM.

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D. C. 20554**

In the Matter of)

Truth-In-Billing)

and)

Billing Format)

CC Docket No. 98-170

Initial Comments of the Wyoming Public Service Commission

Dated: November 12, 1998

The Wyoming Public Service Commission (WPSC), the agency of the State of Wyoming having public utility regulatory jurisdiction over intrastate telecommunications matters, hereby submits its comments to the Federal Communications Commission (Commission) in the above-captioned matter in response to the Commission's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking released therein on September 17, 1998.

1. Introduction. Like the federal Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Wyoming Telecommunications Act of 1995 seeks to foster the development of healthy competition in the telecommunications industry. We recognize that such a market cannot truly develop unless customers make informed decisions concerning their telecommunications services and are able to identify billing irregularities and problems quickly and accurately. The key is understanding, and the consumer's telecommunications bill is probably the most powerful informational and educational tool available. The laws which we, as regulatory agencies must

administer, impose similar requirements and make informative and accurate bills a clear policy choice. Our suggestions follow.

2 Explicit Information. Telecommunications bills should contain explicit information about all of the charges for which the consumer is paying in that specific bill. Therefore, accurate bills should contain descriptions of not only the telecommunications services for which the customer is paying but also a descriptive itemization of the charges imposed by the Commission, state agencies and others to fund programs having a social dimension (e.g., high cost funds, universal service funds, assistance programs, relay programs, 911 surcharges and the like). Many other regulators disagree with this concept, arguing that such charges are not “mandated” because there is no “requirement” to pass them on to consumers. The WPSC believes that such arguments are largely specious because very few, if any, carriers would ever elect simply to absorb these charges. In one way or another, these charges will be passed along to retail customers; and their bills should reflect these facts.

It is more competitively neutral, and much more informative to the consumer about the true cost of telephone service, to show these charges on the bill clearly identified as social programs. We should not allow ourselves to entertain the comfortable but false belief that carriers will somehow find a “competitive advantage or disadvantage” in such charges depending on how they incorporate

them in rates. If they are worthy social programs, they should not be the subject of competitive jockeying, and if they are expensive, unpopular and unjustified, they should not be hidden but should be illustrated plainly for the consumer. Any program which depends on murky or hidden financing for its survival should be exposed to public scrutiny, and the consumer's bill is the point at which such programs would be judged most sharply.

Such an itemization need not be long or burdensomely detailed, but it should clearly differentiate the various bill adders. We do not believe that "philosophical differences" such as a desire by a telecommunications company to apply universal service funds in a nonstandard way should be an excuse for not showing the required payment (or a universal service *credit*, for that matter) on the bill. Finally, we believe that taxes should be given a meaningful level of informational itemization so that consumers can assess this dimension of their bills and accurately understand the impact of taxes on the bottom line of the bill.

3. Limiting the Detail. Automated billing systems, high speed laser printers and the complexities of the current telecommunications industry have created a situation in which great masses of detail can be captured and provided economically as part of the customer's bill. It is possible in such a situation that the facts that are really important to the consumer could get lost in a welter of essentially meaningless detail. There should be a balance of information which

provides a clear and concise statement of charges and avoids both overwhelming detail and uninformative simplicity. Too much detail is just as confusing and frustrating to customers as too little.

While the charges for each distinct service should be shown clearly on the bill (just as charges for social programs and taxes should be), it might not be as necessary for customers to receive monthly packages of information on, for example, the latest changes in access prices together with a discussion of how that might relate to reductions in toll prices. Some regulators may be frustrated or suspicious that companies appear to be passing on increases mandated for special social programs but not relaying matters such as access reductions similarly. Perhaps the better way to deal with these special circumstances would be through one time notifications, such as bill inserts or press releases. It could present information without turning “the bill into a book.”

Billing costs also escalate as the level of detail increases and some moderation here could assist in controlling consumer costs.

4. Dealing successfully with multiple providers. The competitive telecommunications market allows many companies to provide their services to consumers and therefore for many companies to contribute to monthly telephone bills. In this situation, it is imperative for bills to clearly show the name and billing


inquiry number of each carrier (and probably also the carrier's address) presented together with an equally clear itemization of all of the charges for that company's services for the month.

Even though there are complicated billing and collection arrangements between long distance and deregulated service providers and the local billing carriers, it is misleading not to be able to see clearly the services a particular company furnished during the month and equally frustrating not to be able to question the actual service provider without first having to make an extended inquiry to ferret them out. Therefore, bills should be itemized by carrier rather than by service.

5. Who should be responsible? We do not believe that responsibility for the content and accuracy of customer billings should rest solely with the entity which prepares and sends the final bill. Some responsibility must be shouldered by the other carriers who contribute billing information to the process to make sure that the customer receives a clear, complete, concise and informational bill.

Dated November 12, 1998.

Respectfully submitted,


STEVE ELLENBECKER
Chairman


STEVE FURTNEY
Commissioner

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Stephen G. Oxley, Secretary and Chief Counsel of the Wyoming Public Service Commission, do hereby certify that, on November 12, 1998, I filed and served true, complete and correct copies of the within and foregoing Initial Comments of the Wyoming Public Service Commission as required by the pertinent directives of the Federal Communications Commission applicable thereto.

WYOMING PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

By: 

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